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SUBJECT: SPAIN FIGHTS FAT

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1. The Health Ministry unveiled February 10 Spain's first ever Nutrition and Obesity Prevention Strategy (NAOS). To respond to what she labeled Spain's obesity "pandemic," Health Minister Elena Salgado launched a largely exhortatory effort to get Spaniards to voluntarily reduce their daily intake of unsaturated fats, salts and sugars and engage in increased physical activity. Salgado said that 14.5 percent of Spanish adults were obese and 38.5 percent were overweight. She argued the problem was even more alarming for Spanish children, whose obesity rate (for children aged between six and 12) has increased from five to 16 percent over the past decade. Thirty percent of children in this age group are now considered overweight. The Minister claimed that health problems related to obesity were responsible for seven percent of Spanish health spending.

2. NAOS was produced after a cooperative effort by 80 stakeholders. The plan, inter alia, calls on the processed food industry to reduce the sodium content of their products by 10 percent and to reduce advertising for their least healthy products. It also asks food producers to put clearer nutritional information on their labels and requests that restaurants serve more fruits and vegetables and include nutritional information on their menus. NAOS also calls on schools to introduce nutrition classes, ban soda and snack food machines, and serve more nutritional school lunches. Only on the school front does NAOS call for legislation (a possible Royal Decree Law to regulate school cafeterias).

3. NAOS leaves it up to business to decide how to accomplish the plan's general objectives. It does not include any special taxes or tax incentives to encourage compliance. The Minister stressed that "bad foods do not exist; only unbalanced diets."

4. COMMENT: Salgado was spurred into action by a report released last fall by the Spanish Society for the Study of Obesity. The numbers she cited February 10 were the figures announced in this study and reported in reftel. After this report was published, Salgado announced that she was "worried" by the results and planned to do something about this problem. And now she has. But her plan largely lacks enforcement mechanisms and relies on the goodwill of the processed food industry. Snack or "junk" foods often include larger profit margins than other foodstuffs. Asking business to take measures that may have a direct impact on their bottom line may not produce the results sought by Minister Salgado. But there is clearly some value in merely increasing awareness of the problem. They say that recognizing you have a problem is the first step toward solving it.

MANZANARES